

DOES MARSHALLESE STUDIES EXIST? TOWARDS THE UNCOMFORTABLE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF DIFFERENCE

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ABSTRACT In the fall of 2009, the College of the Marshall Islands announced the development of a new Marshallese Studies program, one whose only requirements were that it fit within the institution's academic template and did not challenge accreditation standards. This paper asks the question of whether such an endeavor is possible, framed by an ethics of difference and paralogy theorized through a decolonizing lens. Here I am concerned with the effects of trying to create an area studies program that is disciplined within institutional assumptions of objectivity, truth, and a politics of neutrality, while simultaneously attempting to privilege the production of local Marshallese knowledges as legitimate in a colonial structure that forecloses on such spaces of political, ethical, and epistemological alterity. I consider a trio of problematic initiatives that fell short of legitimizing indigenous knowledges, as well as the difficulty and necessity of forcing the issue of institutional contingency through the privileging of Marshallese language.

Keywords: Epistemology, Marshallese studies, cultural studies, difference, higher education

“The wisdom of the similitude, the wisdom of the centuries (that is why she prefers to think in similitudes rather than reason things out), is that it is silent on the life the genie leads shut up in the bottle. It merely says that the world would be better off if the genie remained imprisoned.”

J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*

Life in the Motor City

In the fall of 2009, I was asked by the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) to develop a field of area studies that had yet to be invented: Marshallese Studies. The only criteria given were that the program needed to conform to the institution’s academic template and accreditation standards of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), CMI’s accrediting agency (and its consequent access to Pell grants, for which almost all of its student body qualifies). As a non-Marshallese academic, I found my new title, coordinator of Marshallese Studies, politically suspect and inherently disadvantageous for the task at hand, as the assumption made by the institution seemed to be one of a politics of neutrality and western higher education universality; indeed, the creation of such a program was presented as merely a matter of shaping content to fit the structure of the institution rather than a serious consideration of the decidedly non-western social context within which the college is located: the Marshall Islands.

This paper asks, and attempts to begin to answer, if the creation of such a program is even possible if one takes seriously the challenge of an ethics of difference

in response to the various nodes of the production and disciplinarization of what constitutes legitimate knowledge, colored by the effects of colonization, assumed by such an endeavor. As Parry (1994) argues, “a postcolonial critique is designated as deconstructing and displacing Eurocentric [or in this case American-centric] premises of a discursive apparatus which constructed the Third World not only for the west but also for the cultures so represented” (p. 172). In other words, are Marshallese knowledges commensurate with American-style higher education, and what do we risk foreclosing on if they are not? Is there a way to institutionalize difference without erasing it or relegating it to cultural content?

Before proceeding, it seems appropriate not to assume too much on the part of the reader in terms of the contexts of the Marshall Islands and Micronesia, schooling therein, and even about me (since I factor somewhat necessarily in this discussion). Without going into too much detail, then, a brief note. The region known as Micronesia was administered as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands by the United States immediately following World War II through the mid-1980s, at which point separate political entities were constructed: the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia. While these three countries are nominally independent, they are indelibly (and from some perspectives terminally) tied to the US through their respective Compacts of Free Association, international agreements that give the US military strategic denial rights to the region while ensuring access to US federal funds for the three nations.

Additionally, while the US does not officially acknowledge it is a colonial power (for then it would need to take responsibility for its colonies), the current quasi-colonial status of the states in Micronesia was only possible because the societies themselves had so dramatically changed, most notably through the advent of American schooling in the islands. But I argue that colonial schooling (which persists to this day in the region) is not a function of earlier Spanish or German parochial schools, nor does it have anything to do with the Japanese colonial period (between the two World Wars), in which public schools were introduced to the islands for the purposes of educating the colonizing populace (and not the colonized); rather, schooling today is the result of a very particular genealogical moment, or, in Deleuzean terms, “event” (Colwell, 1997): the time when the US embarked on a drastic and deliberate program of socio-cultural change in the Trust Territory through the Great Society programs of the Johnson administration, beginning in 1964.

Within a short period, US funding for schools in the islands quadrupled, Peace Corps volunteers arrived in classrooms (at a rate of 1 volunteer for every 100 Islanders), and Islanders had access almost overnight to funding programs such as Head Start, Free Breakfast and Lunch, and, most importantly for our purposes, Pell grants. It is in this moment that institutions of higher education are founded in each of the capital districts of the Trust Territory, and by the early 1990s each local college is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, ensuring access to Pell grants, need-based grants that are used

to pay full tuition for almost every student in the region. (For a more detailed account, see Kupferman, 2013, specifically chapters 3 and 5).

One final piece to briefly consider is my role in all of this. I worked at the College of the Marshall Islands from 2004 to 2013, and, from 2009 to 2012, I was named Coordinator of Marshallese Studies. The reasons for this appellation were simple, and stemmed almost entirely from the inability and unwillingness of the American administrators at the college to want to deal directly with Marshallese instructors or students. Indeed, the administrative and teaching makeup of the college continues today to be a function of the very real colonial situation in which the entire country of the Marshall Islands finds itself, and there are strong parallels to be made between the colonial ties binding the Marshallese to the US through the Compact as well as through access to Pell grants. For the purposes of this discussion, however, what is important is to understand that I was given this charge, to coordinate a program that did not exist, not because of any intrinsic ability on my part to transcend cultural boundaries and “represent” Marshallese perspectives (despite my graduate training in Pacific Islands Studies), but because I was seen as an adequate buffer between the colonial administrative apparatus and the society they had come to the islands to purportedly serve.

But perhaps a better place to start, then, is with an image. The seal of the College of the Marshall Islands shows three figures, in various poses, on an outrigger canoe sailing in tropical waters (as evidenced by the trio of palm trees on a small island to the left)

under what appears to be the night sky. Below the image is the phrase “Jitdam Kapeel,” which is in turn above the date “1993.” On both left and right are two stars reminiscent of the one on the Republic of the Marshall Islands flag. It is unclear whether the canoe is moving towards or away from the viewer, which seems appropriate as there is no fixed bow or stern on a Marshallese canoe. Above the whole image is the name of the institution (see Figure 1).

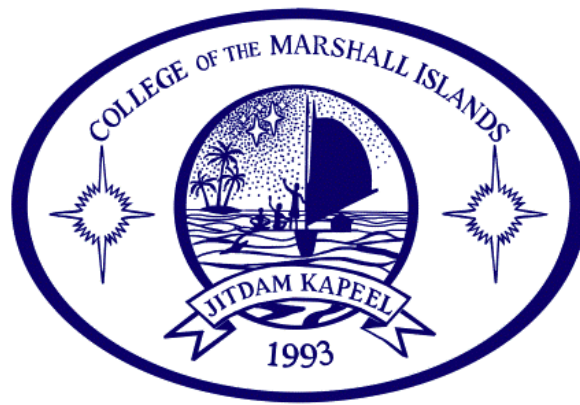


Figure 1. The official seal of the College of the Marshall Islands. Used with permission.

What are we to make of this seeming conflict of ideas, images, and words? Just what does a college, which in all public reports has appended to the bottom of its seal the words “Accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges,” one which is the product of a colonial relationship with the United States, have to do with Marshallese canoes, sailing, or knowledges? Just what, in particular, is Marshallese about the College of the Marshall Islands, besides the otherwise abstract image conveyed on its seal?

It is useful to take a brief turn to visual analysis. Barthes (1977) offers the twin concepts of denotation and connotation: what an image says (denotation) and what it means (connotation), or, in Barthes' words, "the literal image is *denoted* and the symbolic image *connoted*" (p. 37, original emphases). In this way, the literal image in the college seal states that the college is located in the Marshall Islands (suggested by the canoe and tropical islet in the background). More interesting, however, is the symbolic image, suggesting, with its centering of the canoe, the use of stars (since Marshallese navigation relies predominantly on celestial direction), and the visible currents, that the college is committed to, if not grounded in, Marshallese ways of knowing. This concept of indigenous knowledges becomes even more important when one considers that in Marshallese custom what might be termed "culture" creates the epistemology of the canoe, using the Marshallese language itself.

Reinforcing the symbolic message, as Barthes (1977) explains, is the linguistic message, or what he refers to as anchorage. In our case, it is the term "Jitdam Kapeel," which has most recently been used as the name of the college newsletter, translated as "to gain knowledge through inquiry and sharing of information" (College of the Marshall Islands, 2012). Indeed, the anchorage of the caption serves as a kind of limiting force on the diegetic possibilities contained within the image, so that "the linguistic message no longer guides identification but interpretation, constituting a kind of vice which holds the connoted meanings from proliferating" (Barthes, 1977, p. 39).

Here, then, we have a bit of what might be called local wisdom (“jitdam kapeel”) along with local knowledges (through the symbolic image of the canoe) encapsulated entirely by the institution, which proclaims itself linguistically through the device of a parallel, and superior, anchorage hovering above the entire scene (through the naming of this institution as the “College of the Marshall Islands”). What is more, the notion that the college is in fact the national college, an idea that is repeated in both the college’s mission and vision statements (College of the Marshall Islands, 2010), can be found in the stars to the image’s left and right, evocative as they are of the nation’s flag. Here we might slightly alter Parry’s (1994) critique of cultural nationalism to produce a parallel critique of institutional nationalism, “which simply reproduces existing categories, performing an identical function and producing the same effects as the system it contests” (p. 180).

But this journey into connotation does not seem to adequately answer our opening questions, nor does it move us far enough analytically into considering what is occurring extra-diegetically, and therefore extra-institutionally. Another perspective on the image may be needed, one that takes the notion of the figural not as a matter of visual signs at play within a field of semiotics, but rather one of epistemology. Here, Lyotard’s critique of connotation as yet another form of writing, in which “The theory of connotation reduces the figural to the linguistic order of the code” (Readings, 1991, p. 32), allows us to consider the image as an epistemological incommensurability. In this way, the figural “evokes a difference which cannot

be regulated, cannot be understood as the ratio of alteration between signification A and signification C” (Readings, 1991, p. 29). Rather than treating the seal of the college as an image that denotes and connotes, what moves our questions, and the conditions for possible answers, forward (or at least in some direction) is the notion that the image of the canoe constitutes an epistemology, in this case of Marshallese knowledges, that is incommensurate with an American style college and its attendant epistemes of “universal knowledge” and self-evident neutrality. In other words, embedded within this figural of the college is a challenge to the notion of the institution itself.

In this way, we look again to the image not so that we can define what it means, in terms of semiotics or the visual application of structural linguistics, but rather the ways in which it presents a disruption in the logic of representation, what Readings (1991) calls “a radical heterogeneity, a singularity” (p. 4). That is, we are interested here in the singularity of the figural, of the canoe sailing in a field of western higher education epistemology, not to make an argument based on epistemological equivalences but instead to claim its consequence as a matter of difference. As Lyotard (2011) argues, “What is wanted is to have words *say* the preeminence of the figure, to *signify* the other of signification” (p. 18, original emphases); the figure, however, stands outside neat discursive formations, and so we are left to consider the apparent disconnect between discourse as sensibility and the figural as meaningful (Carroll, 1987).

Thus we may ask not what is the meaning of the canoe, as we might according to Barthes' connotative analysis, but why is the canoe there in the first place, as Lyotard impels us to do. This question carries greater weight if we then look for canoes at the college, beyond abstract figural renderings; and if we wind up in the college's parking lot, we see that such a search is effectively meaningless (see Figure 2). In this way the seal lacks both meaning *and* sense, and as a result it wrongs the figural by imposing the rules of discourse upon it, thereby marginalizing the very image (of the canoe) it purports to represent. Indeed, the college has not only no canoe, but no vehicle that does not move on pavement. In 2007 there was a boat that had been purchased for student use, but due in large part to the safety regulations requiring the use of life jackets while on the boat, while the college neglected to provide any, the boat spent its short life at the college in dry dock at the physical plant facility.



Figure 2. The parking lot at the College of the Marshall Islands.
Photograph by the author.

Compounding this incommensurability further is a popular idea within Marshallese society that the language itself is both embedded in, and productive of, a particular cosmological perspective, one that depends greatly upon being able to navigate over open waters. Thus the language can be said to rest upon a sort of trinity of concepts that together form the local name for the islands, *aelōñ kein*, comprised of *ae* (currents), *lōñ* (sky), and *kein* (land)¹. This notion of a Marshallese epistemology of movement (of currents, of people) is also expressed cartographically, as a customary visual representation of the islands can be found in what, for lack of a better term, are today called “stick charts,” of which there are a number of varieties (such as the *rebellib*; see Figure 3).

¹ It should be noted that the use of *kein* to denote “land,” while popular within contemporary Marshallese society, is a liberal translation of the vernacular, and continues to be contested in linguistic circles.

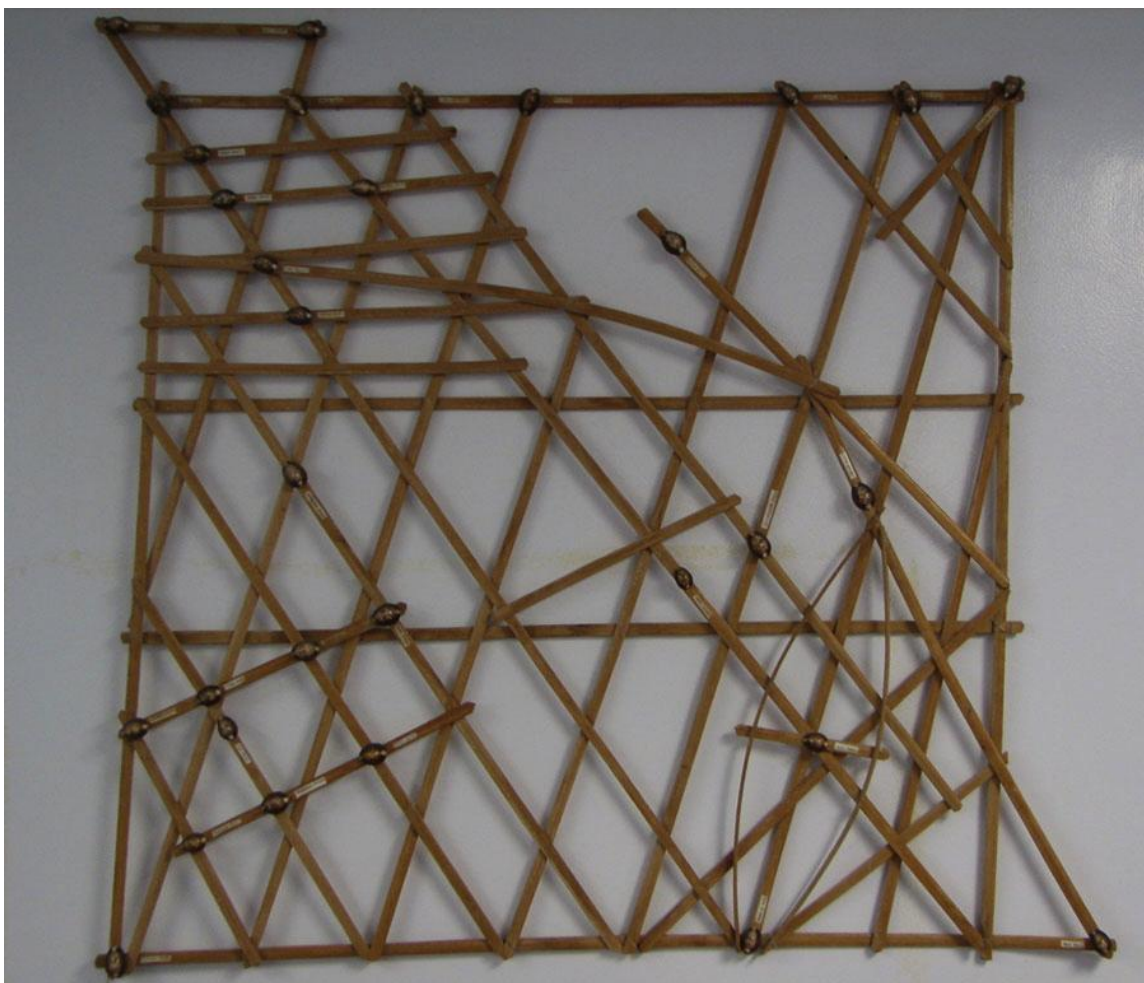


Figure 3. A *rebellib*, a Marshallese navigation map. Photograph by the author.

Here the currents are the islands' connectors, and the routes by which people can move about the atolls. The ocean, in this way, is territorially legitimized. This perspective stands in great contrast to a western conception of the islands as a territory, as in a conventional map we might notice that the islands are disconnected from one another, separated by the ocean which here becomes little more than a barrier to terrestrial unity (see Figure 4). Another way to think of this conflict of maps is to state that I work at the

College of the Marshall Islands, which privileges the knowledge of the western map, while I live in the Marshall Islands, a context that produces the *rebellib*.

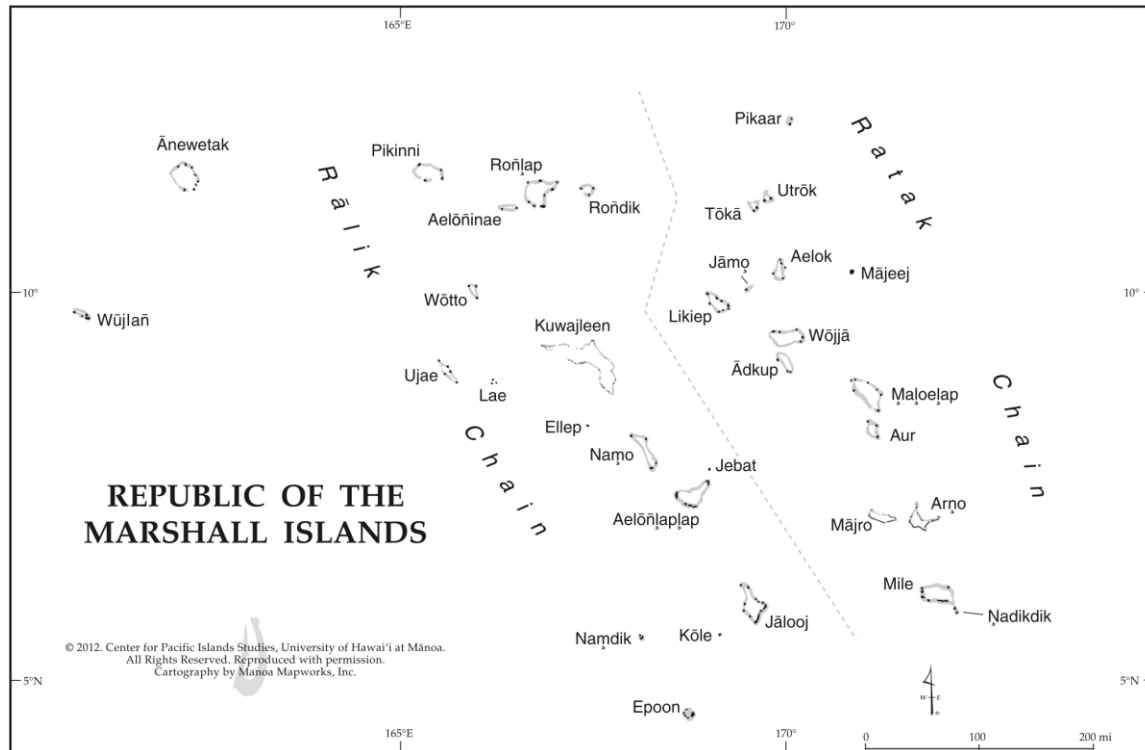


Figure 4. A conventional map of the Marshall Islands. Copyright 2012 Center for Pacific Islands Studies, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Used with permission.

I want to be clear that this argument is not one of opposition, for such an approach assumes a neutralized field of discourse: this canoe is not a car. Rather, the argument here is one of epistemologies that are incommensurable: this actual canoe is not an abstract rendering of a canoe, and cannot make sense in terms of the logic of the car. You cannot sail a canoe down a road, just as you cannot drive a car across the ocean. The figural in this case therefore erases the

actual canoe, and by forcing it to stand in opposition to (and thus according to the rules of) the car, we run the risk of negating that which exists within, and is produced by, what we are calling here Marshallese knowledges. What we need is not a philosophy of opposition, but rather a critical philosophy, one that “disrupts the established system of meaning and keeps open the possibility of unforeseen relations and connections” (Carroll, 1987, p. 33). Our task is therefore to delineate this incommensurability and determine how best to negotiate its limits in order to prevent a wronging of Marshallese Studies, even as we seek to name and design it within the foreign structure of the higher education institution.

Our Sea of Differends

In his essay “Our Sea of Islands,” Hau’ofa (1994) offers a counter-perspective on the Pacific, what he terms Oceania, as being comprised of islands connected in a wide sea rather than as isolated spots of land separated from each other and made remote due to the ocean’s expanse. “Their universe,” Hau’ofa writes of Islander epistemologies, “comprised not only land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it” (p. 152). Hau’ofa rescues and legitimizes the ocean as an indispensable part of Oceania, much the same way that our example of a *rebellib* depends on currents to connect islands, and requires that we include the water as part of our spatial calculations. What he is doing here, without labelling it as such, is invoking Lyotard’s (1988) notion

of the differend, and doing so in order to produce the Pacific as an interconnected region of societies, cultures, and cosmologies that cannot, and should not, be relegated to idioms that dominate western, and by extension “universal,” conceptions of the islands as small, remote, vulnerable, and in almost all ways “other.”

The task of producing a Marshallese Studies program, one that speaks to Marshallese knowledges in a way that does not reduce them to mere similitudes of language and metaphor in the terms of western higher education epistemology, is dependent upon first recognizing that this is a case of the differend, a situation Lyotard (1988) describes as taking place “when the ‘regulation’ of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom” (p. 9). In the case of CMI, the institution is not capable of recognizing its own complicity in the wronging caused to what we call Marshallese Studies by the application of the differend because the institution does not acknowledge it as either legitimate knowledge nor as constructive of what the college considers “reality.” That is, the college can only apply the rules of the road to our aforementioned canoe, resulting in “a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments” (Lyotard, 1988, p. xi).

The key to transcending the differend, then, becomes a matter of naming the conflict and then negotiating the limits of idiom, in order to avoid wronging the parties involved (or at least the one party

wronged by the application of the idiom of the other party). For Lyotard, this approach requires what he calls the linkage of phrases, and “how to respond to, or link up with, the given phrase” (Carroll, 1987, p. 165). That is, how do we link the phrase “Marshallese Studies” with another phrase that does not wrong the various sets of knowledges and epistemologies circulating through what is represented as meaningful through the figural of the canoe, while at the same time addressing the limits of that particular idiom within the language of the institution? For such a phrase implies that such knowledges exist neutrally and self-evidently, as do other “studies” and disciplines within the institution, that they are structured the same way, and that they can be reduced to the metaphor of academic discipline. Yet “Marshallese Studies,” if we are to take the idiom of the canoe seriously, requires that we think beyond the limits of the institution’s erasure of the contingency of “truth” and “knowledge” and the boundaries of the phrase to mean that “Marshallese Studies” can be summed up as mere cultural content neatly wrapped up inside a larger, “universal” (e.g., western) frame that itself exists outside of history and context.

The point here is to link, to recognize the various ways in which the differend wrongs one or the other through such linkages, and to find linkages of phrases that will overcome that differend. The issue of linkage of phrases therefore becomes one of politics, and, along with the aesthetic, “both have as their stakes the discovery of their stakes. They have as their only rule the search for their rules, which, Lyotard insists, cannot be thought to preexist their experimentation

with rules but can only be discovered by means of it” (Carroll, 1987, p. 167). Thus there is here no one “rule” which can govern either the linkage of phrases such as “Marshallese Studies” with a “College of the Marshall Islands,” nor is there a way that these idioms can fairly be used to judge each other. The current linkage of phrases, however, forecloses on alternative linkages that legitimize what may be embedded in the idiom “Marshallese Studies” by imposing the rules of a particular form of knowledge operationalized by the college. Our challenge becomes one of linking different phrases, or what Mignolo (2011) offers is the “epistemic disobedience” (p. 143) of decolonial thinking, and perhaps decolonial linking, both discursively and figurally, politically and aesthetically, in order to navigate what we might idiomatically call a sea of differends.

Complicating this search for new idioms and their linkages is the disciplining of knowledge circulating through the institution. Foucault (2003) traces this phenomenon of disciplinarization as emerging from the Napoleonic era, when institutions began the selection, normalization, hierarchicalization, and centralization of knowledge, effectively producing “real” or “true” knowledge, while simultaneously erasing and foreclosing on alternative sets of knowledges as “false” and therefore illegitimate. As Foucault (2003) puts it, disciplined knowledge “had, in its own field, criteria of selection that allowed it to eradicate false knowledge or nonknowledge” (p. 181). In this way, the deployment of this kind of disciplinary power removes what has been disciplined from the realm of contingency and contestability, and instead produces it as both self-

evident and “universal”; in contrast, all other types and forms of knowledge become contingent, and by implication dispensable.

At the College of the Marshall Islands, we see this disciplining of knowledge and the production of the Enlightenment doxa as indispensable at work in the required courses for graduation, which include English, math, natural, physical, computer, and social science, and the humanities. Nowhere is one required to take a class dealing with Marshallese knowledges; such courses, including Marshallese culture and language, are relegated to the category of “electives” (College of the Marshall Islands, 2010). Thus, these courses that are ostensibly focused on Marshallese ways of being are contingent, as students elect to take them (which, by implication, suggests that they may equally elect *not* to take them), while those courses that arise out of this moment of disciplinary power within the institution are non-contingent (at least if one wants to graduate from the college). This situation creates the peculiar possibility that one can graduate from the College of the Marshall Islands without ever encountering Marshallese knowledges.

A key part of this disciplining, according to Foucault (2003), emerges through what he terms the “regularity of enunciations,” through which the disciplinarization of knowledge sorts “those [statements] that were acceptable out from those that were unacceptable” (p. 184) and replaces them within a system (and systems) of what is metaphorically referred to as “science.” Here, the field of science “will raise specific problems relating to the disciplinary policing of knowledges: problems of classification,

problems of hierarchicalization, problems of proximity, and so on” (p. 182); in so doing, all other typologies of knowledge that exist outside the realm of this trope of science must now conform to its system(s) of classification and ordering. Any set of knowledge or knowledges that refuses or rejects such ordering is consequently produced as non-scientific, and therefore nonknowledge.

What we have, then, is a situation in which science, through the disciplinarization of knowledges, claims to discover the conditions of reality and truth as universal, but fails to acknowledge that those very conditions are, in fact, historical and contextual constructs (Shapiro, 2012). That is, science appeals to a self-evident, ontological reality that exists outside of history, and succeeds in doing so by its “regularity of enunciations.” Tambiah (1990) admits that “this conceptual and mathematico-logical unity of the reality out there is...only one ordering of reality, with its own confines and area of competence” (p. 114). Yet by trafficking in the realm of the idiom, the scientificity of a particular field of studies, according to the rules laid out by this disciplining of knowledge, must be asserted and conformed to, and done so according to the rules of scientific truth, in order to be legitimized as “real.”

In other words, what we have here is an application of the differend, as all legitimate knowledge is defined as such according to the rules and idioms laid out by a very particular construction and normalization of science. Thus, a discipline like Marshallese Studies is required to adhere to the metaphors of universality operating through the

typologizing of knowledge within the scientific paradigm, or it risks being exoticized (as well as fetishized and perhaps even ghettoized) as some sort of “other” studies, by failing to align itself within the normalized regularity of enunciations of the institution. So let us now take a look at how “Marshallese Studies” was (and to some extent still is) designed and deployed at the college, and if it even exists as a result of its encounter with the differend.

Desperately Seeking Similitudes

“Marshallese Studies,” as a field of inquiry, while unique to the College of the Marshall Islands, represents a not-uncommon approach to what might be termed the ethnic studies programs around the region. There is a Palauan Studies program at Palau Community College; Micronesian Studies at the College of Micronesia in Pohnpei (the capital of the Federated States of Micronesia); and even a masters-level degree in Micronesian Studies at the University of Guam. What each of these programs, including Marshallese Studies, does, however, is operate in the realm of similitude; that is, in applying the differend, a rationalization is made that all of these area studies in fact operate on the same epistemological plane as, say, “the humanities” or “the social sciences,” and that area studies A is similar to area studies B, so long as they fit neatly within the regularity of enunciations that requires them to conform to the categories of “real” (that is, “universal”) knowledge as defined both by the institution itself as well as by the process of

institutionalization (through the disciplinary power of legitimate knowledge).

Foucault (1983) argues that “the similar develops in series that have neither beginning nor end, that can be followed in one direction as easily as in another, that obey no hierarchy, but propagate themselves from small differences among small differences” (p. 44); here, then, we see a propagation of ethnic studies differentiated by such things as geography, language, custom, and history (e.g., Palauan Studies in Palau, Micronesian Studies in Micronesia, etc.), but not differentiated on the basis of epistemology, as they all fall under a rubric (that of the institution) that acts as an ontological phenomenon.

Palauan Studies is equivalent therefore to Marshallese Studies, and the only thing that differentiates them is vocabulary, or a few cultural quirks, or an adage or two. There is never a consideration of the possibility of a variety of epistemological perspectives at work, since the erasure of such frames is necessary for this type of area studies to exist within a decidedly colonial institution like the college or university (Kupferman, 2013).

Additionally, when we begin to enter into the discourse of educational systems and structures (by which is often meant “schools”), the notion of the similitude operates as both a way to make sense of what may be incommensurate as well as to define, and dismiss, that incommensurability as merely a function of otherness. Thus, the institution stands alone as a self-evident, ahistorical construct existing outside of time and space, and we must fit these various “other”

studies *into* the structure of the institution. The college is pre-existing; it is never the case, in the realm of similitudes, that these epistemologies should be the foundation of what constitutes “knowledge,” as true knowledge is already embodied by, and embedded in, the institution. Broadening our geographic scope a bit, we can see how this procession of similitudes would operate should our particular area studies programs at some point themselves attempt to constitute the institution when Nabobo-Baba (2006), writing of the Vugalei in Fiji, suggests “an institute to train young Fijians in important Fijian customs, values and philosophies of life...could be useful” (p. 133).

One might ask why, if those customs, values, and philosophies of life are truly important, as Nabobo-Baba offers, they would need to exist within the institution, removed from everyday life. The issue becomes one not only of seeking similitudes in order to conform to the non-contingent paradigms of the institution, but going so far as to suggest that the application of these epistemologies, which I would argue are organic and always changing rather than static and fixed in time and form, can only happen *through* the institution, thereby suggesting that “customs, values and philosophies of life” do not need to be encountered in one’s daily business, as they now exist outside of lived experience. The site of “real” learning is now exclusively the domain of the institution, while the context of society as a space for learning is foreclosed upon. Epistemological difference as legitimate difference is here reduced to course content.

It should be noted that the Marshallese Studies program as it was originally envisioned at CMI was the result of a variety of factors, none of which included involving actual Marshallese individuals or Marshallese perspectives or knowledges in the process. While the reasons for my selection and participation have been documented elsewhere (Kupferman, 2013), suffice it to say that the administration of the college at the time decided that the institution needed to respond to an implicit directive from the accrediting commission to offer more “Marshallese Studies” courses, and that, upon my return to the campus from a brief period of educational leave, I would be the one chosen to serve as the nascent program’s coordinator. I was given some release time (which was ultimately eliminated, as was the title of coordinator), a minimal budget (which would disappear after two years), and as the four courses that already existed in the college catalog (Marshallese culture, government, grammar, and orthography) were housed in the liberal arts department, the program would follow suit.

My directive was clear: develop something that the institution could label “Marshallese Studies” to please the accreditors during the upcoming self-study; serve as the intermediary between the native Marshallese adjunct instructors who taught the four extant courses and the chair of the liberal arts department; and do so with as little effect on the institution as possible.

In the end, I am ashamed to say that I succeeded. What was created in those few years that I served as coordinator—of a program that did not exist, that the institution was not particularly interested in supporting, and which included a certificate program

in Marshallese Studies, a canoe-building initiative that sank before it was built, and an attempt at legitimizing Marshallese conceptions of ethics—demonstrates both the philosophical as well as structural limits of institutionalizing difference, especially when that difference is neither understood nor recognized in the first place and is substituted instead with a faith in similitudes. Here we should take each of these three endeavors in turn.

Marshalllese Studies and the Certifiable

The first initiative undertaken, at the behest of the academic administration and with the encouragement of the liberal arts department chair, was to design a certificate in Marshallese Studies that was modeled on other certificates within the department, such as the one in counseling. Through the college's curriculum and assessment committee, a certificate program was approved that first adhered to accreditation standards (which meant that it had to have a minimum of 24 credit hours) and was composed broadly of three parts: a section of courses that fell under a humanities heading; a section that could be classified as social science; and a pair of language courses. The three courses taught exclusively in Marshallese (culture, grammar, and orthography), as well as the fourth extant course, government (which was taught in English if a non-Marshallese speaking student enrolled in the course), formed the required core for the certificate. Padding the rest of the required credits were a handful of courses that were all taught in

English, and most of which were taught by non-Marshallese instructors (including myself).

Legitimizing the certificate program (but not Marshallese knowledges) was the set of assessment requirements put forth by the accrediting commission, including a program review, assessments of student learning outcomes, and the question of transferability of credits within the certificate to other institutions. Here we can see what Baez and Boyles (2009) refer to as the “culture of science” that has come to dominate educational research, especially through the scientization of accrediting processes that have adopted the quantification of learning (euphemistically called student learning outcomes) as the truest measure of what is happening in an institution, as well as embodying what is called “best practices.” In this way, the regularity of enunciations of scientized and mathematized “truth” has infiltrated even such fields as the humanities, and, in our case, even such “nonknowledge” as Marshallese Studies.

The idea that one could even write a certificate in Marshallese Studies assumes at least three things: first, that the structure of a certificate program is ontological and therefore neutral, and that the content is interchangeable; second, that what is contingent in this case is content (and thereby all of what we have so far considered as “Marshallese Studies”); and third, that the concepts of certificates, curricula, and methods of instruction are reflective of a natural order of learning, rather than as the result of colonial relations of power and the erasure of difference. In other words, as Foucault (2003) asks, “what set can it [the discipline] be fitted into, and how and to what

extent does it conform to other forms and other typologies of knowledge?” (p. 184). In this way the college has performed the rather neat trick of offering Marshallese Studies without actually offering Marshallese epistemologies, and it has accomplished this primarily through an appeal to the comfort of reducing Marshallese perspectives, knowledges, and ways of being in the world to the level of similitudes. Luke (2011) also warns against this type of approach and the possibility that

American educational science narrowly defined leads to the elimination of local pedagogic traditions, Indigenous cultures, vernacular languages, secular and nonsecular forms of what we, for want of a better term, refer to as *informal education* and relegate to comparative studies—as museum pieces or token chapters in a world of overproliferating handbooks and encyclopedias. (p. 375, original emphasis)

Indeed, by sorting the certificate according to categories of humanities, social sciences, and language, it has privileged those categories while foreclosing on conditions of possibility that would allow alternative conceptions of just what Marshallese Studies could be, and perhaps only can become, outside the confines of the institution. And by housing the certificate and the program in the liberal arts department, the institution produces Marshallese Studies as a “branch” of liberal arts, rather than as the very foundation of knowledges and epistemologies

circulating through Marshallese society. The idiom of the institution and the scientization of educational research are the rules by which the differend is judging the idiom of Marshallese knowledges, and Marshallese knowledges are found wanting as long as they are enunciated outside the realm of similitudes.

The (Not Quite) Canoe Project

It is a common trope within Marshallese society to suggest that the canoe contains the complexity of the culture, customs, and language within its construction, deployment, and symbolism. Likewise, the variety of relations, based on land tenure, access to particular knowledges, gender relations, and power that form the core of what is commonly referred to as *mantin Majel* (Marshallese culture/custom) can be found in the vocabulary of canoe-building and navigation (Miller, 2010). We have already seen two examples in this essay of the canoe and its attendant import in at least offering a simulated representation of what might be classified as “Marshallese” with our discussions about the college seal and the *rebellib*. Building a canoe, then, seemed like an obvious place for a Marshallese Studies program to travel.

I want to make a distinction here between building a canoe and transmitting the knowledges associated with navigation, as what came to be known at the college as the canoe project was concerned solely with the former; the latter contains a variety of contradictions and double-binds that were, and continue to be, beyond the scope of the institution to even address, let alone begin to resolve. Genz (2011)

outlines the series of problematics associated with instruction in and application of actually sailing a canoe, including the restriction of navigation techniques and their transmission to select others as the purview of the customary ruling elite (*irooj*, or landowners) as well as the difficulty of what he calls “preserving” (a term that I take issue with, as it assumes a dead or dying idea that needs to be set in some form of gelling agent that will fix it in time) and revitalizing navigational knowledge sets in a way that both allows for the continual development of indigenous navigation for present and future generations while simultaneously acknowledging and respecting indigenous relational customs. Additionally, as discussed above, there is any number of philosophical challenges associated with attempting to institutionalize such customary knowledges within a colonial frame that assumes epistemological neutrality, as the college does. Instead, as both Genz (2011) and Miller (2010) describe, the act of learning and mastering how to build a canoe is a separate field. The construction of a canoe was likely the biggest decision an atoll community had to make (ultimately with the blessing of the *irooj*), since it requires the cutting down of a mature breadfruit tree, a staple of food resources, as well as the service of both the men in carving and lashing the actual canoe and women in the weaving of the sail.

To that end, we set out to build a canoe, with one important caveat: we wanted to see if it was possible, in the 21st century, to build a canoe, which is widely considered vital to the functioning and survival of the local culture, in an age of so-called decolonization in a

supposedly developing urban center without money changing hands. Our question was, then, can you build something that is supposed to represent the entirety of a culture with customary means (e.g., without the neo-colonial trappings of modern development such as foreign aid or “cultural preservation” grants)?

We began by enlisting the help of a former employee of the college, an individual who is a respected elder on a neighboring atoll, and together we located two mature breadfruit logs on Majuro, the capital atoll of the Marshall Islands, and were able to have them both donated and delivered to the college’s front lawn (not an easy feat, considering the size and weight of the logs). While this process of locating, cutting down, and transporting the logs took the better part of six months, it quickly dawned on us that that would be the easy part. For while we assumed (correctly) that there were a number of individuals at the college who both knew how to carve the logs and would be interested in doing so, everyone deferred to a local non-governmental organization that has helped, over the past two decades, to reintroduce the actual construction of canoes in the country. And despite our attempts to press the case that if you could indeed build a canoe in Majuro without resorting to financial transactions, that act alone would speak volumes about the possibilities of designing alternatives to the dictates of neo-liberal economic development and radically alter the trajectory of the Marshall Islands, and perhaps other so-called “developing” nation-states, we were told that the NGO could not participate without being able to pay its master-builders (even

though those same individuals had volunteered their time for the project).

In the end, the canoe remained a potential canoe, as we were shuttled for another six months between the NGO and the local historic preservation office in their attempts to locate a grant that would fund the project. While the larger implications of this “grants culture” is beyond the scope of the current discussion, it is useful to consider the warning offered by Baez and Boyles (2009): “It is not important what the grant is for—the amount is the primary focus; the research itself is irrelevant, or, more accurately, of secondary importance” (p. 175). Thus the revitalization of canoe building in this case fell victim to the more insidious habits and practices of economic development and what I would call the privatization of culture, as there was no one in a position of decision-making who could think outside of a grant. As a result, much like the way that Nabobo-Baba’s suggestion for institutionalizing what is “important” to a society removes those habits and ways of being from the society itself, our experience with the failure of the canoe project demonstrates that, in a world dominated by external funding and grants culture, the culture-makers are no longer those in the community, such as the *irooj* or the master carvers, but now are almost exclusively those who hold the purse strings—and they are almost always external donors who operate outside that community and its customs.

Ethics in Translation

The third and final initiative that we will consider here became known as the Marshall Islands Research Assessment Checklist (MIRAC), an unfortunately convoluted name for what was originally thought of as a simple and obvious need, for both the college and the country as a whole. As the site of the US's nuclear weapons testing program that ran from 1946-1958, during which 67 atomic and hydrogen bombs were dropped on the atolls of Bikini and Enewetak, one might assume that the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) had developed a sophisticated mechanism for safeguarding the lives and interests of individuals from the potentially harmful (and historically lethal) effects of research conducted in and on the islands and Islanders. Yet there is no national human subjects research protocol, and outside researchers continue to engage human subjects without any oversight or regulations within the country. Even the Economic Policy, Planning, and Statistics Office (EPPSO), which conducts continual demographic surveys throughout the atolls and reports directly to the RMI President, has no human subjects guidelines.

The idea, then, was to put a set of principles and regulations in place at the college that could serve as a model for the national government, safeguard the rights of Marshallese people who continue to suffer, now under the umbrella of "academic research," and highlight the need to protect those being studied for ethical reasons considering the islands' nuclear history. Additionally, I engaged with two Marshallese colleagues in order to develop a set of research

protocols for visiting researchers that would be grounded in local conceptions of ethics, research, and customary practices, along the lines of what Smith (1999) advocates for those conducting research among Islanders.

What became immediately apparent, however, was that we were operating at Tambiah's (1990) edge of commensurability, and that an assumption was made about "ethics" and "ethical research" in terms of their ability not only to be translatable but also transposable across cultures. The reason for this assumption was the fact that we were operating from a perspective of metaphorical language, in English, and my Marshallese counterparts were unable to design a set of local "ethics" since they were starting in a language other than Marshallese—and therefore with a set of metaphorical tropes that assumed a universality and neutrality of ethics.

There are three troubling circulations in effect here: first, that we are employing the differend, in that the starting point is not only English, but the construction of meanings at work in the use of the concept of "ethics"; second, we are wronging Marshallese perspectives and knowledges as they pertain to ethical conduct, as our starting point is from a western scientific positivism (indeed, we run into trouble with the trope of "research" itself); third, this wronging is compounded by the directive to link phrases, between English, into Marshallese, and back into English, in a way that makes sense to non-Marshallese researchers.

Recalling Lyotard (1988), we are perpetrating that moment when “something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be” (p. 13) by demanding that the tropes of “ethics” and “research,” which are themselves produced by metaphorical language, be somehow acontextual and therefore representative of a universal “reality,” when, in fact, it may be the case that these concepts are simply untranslatable in a meaningful way. Indeed, this conundrum is not unique to the limits of translation between disparate language families; one need look only so far as the lengths to which Foucault (1980) and his translators attempt to explain the distinction, in English, of “savoir” and “connaissance.”

Spivak (1993) points out the importance of moving beyond logic in translation, and the need to focus on the rhetoricity and contingency of language, for “Without a sense of the rhetoricity of language, a species of neocolonialist construction of the non-Western scene is afoot” (p. 181). What we are left with, then, is a set of research protocols at the college which look very much like those found at other, western institutions, with a light patina of “culture” (such as asking the *irooj* permission to conduct the research). What we have failed to do is confront the differend by conceiving of this project in Marshallese, and then looking for ways to translate its metaphors into English if absolutely necessary, rather than continue to seek similitudes with which to explain the incommensurate.

Of Canoes and Other Metaphors

The challenges outlined above all seem to lead back to our earlier discussion about the use of idioms and the task of linking phrases in such a way that we do not wrong one phrase by applying the epistemology governing the other. Yet it is no simple thing to legitimate a set of knowledges through the rules governing institutionalization and disciplinary power, build an actual canoe in the face of its own abstraction, or transpose highly contextualized notions of ethics across metaphorical lines. And so we should return to the proposal from Lyotard (1988) that “What is at stake...in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them” (p. 13), by finding other, paralogical methods for linking phrases.

Here I want to take a moment to briefly consider Lyotard’s application of, and ultimate call for, paralogism. What we have implied throughout this discussion is a question put forth by Haber (1994): “can we have a politics that does not allow for structure?” (p. 23). In other words, does the existence, let alone design, of Marshallese Studies necessitate such a radical rethinking of the institution (and all those forces acting upon it, such as economic development discourses, the colonial relations of accreditation, the culture of science and quantification of “knowledge”) that we in effect need to trespass beyond the edge of incommensurability entirely? It would seem that, in order to bear witness to the various differends deployed in the service of both

constructing and erasing the otherness of the legitimacy of Marshallese (and other “false”) knowledges, we need to employ a paralogical approach to otherness itself, and “reconceptualiz[e] politics as a politics of difference where otherness is not only expected, but encouraged” (Haber, 1994, p. 30).

When we venture into the real of paralogism, we are therefore required to shed the very boundaries of what might be called philosophical reasonings so that the current structure (of language, of image, of reality) can be seen as merely one of an infinite number of ways of producing the world, and consequently serve as a vehicle for a multiplicity of legitimate (and therefore “true”) knowledges to begin to link their phrases in ways that are no longer prescribed (nor proscribed). Milligan et al. (2011) suggest “we must be able to listen to the experience of intelligent life expressed in discourses that we may not recognize as philosophical” (p. 52); but in fact, the matter is not one of *listening* so much as it is the difficult necessity to *think* in those discourses.

The charge becomes one of denying a politics of neutrality, in such a way that we open up spaces for alterity, notably of epistemology. A possible route towards the paralogical, once again, lies in our attempts at the linkage of phrases: as Carroll (1987) reminds us, “The only necessity...is linkage itself...‘To link is necessary, how to link is not’” (p. 166). Thus Lyotard explodes the rules governing linkage by exposing the theoretically infinite number of ways that phrases may be linked. We are free to link phrases from a variety of literary codes and in any language, so long as we deny their universality and neutrality, and

in so doing bear witness to their differends. At the end of the day, this move to linkage, or, recalling Mignolo (2011), decolonial linking, is really a matter of answering Parry's (1994) call for postcolonial critique in order to legitimize what has been, and continues to be, a sublimated set of indigenous knowledges.

So how do we employ a paralogy (of language, of politics, of justice)? That is, how do we engage the figural as "the co-existence of *incommensurable* terms" (Readings, 1991, p. 32, original emphasis)? A recent, and by far the most promising, initiative has been the assembling of a group from throughout the campus called the Cultural Transmission and Translation Advisory Committee (CTTAC). The CTTAC, while operating under the authority of the college's institutional planning committee, committed itself to what amounts to paralogical thinking, and it has both rejected the idea that the college *needs* to look the way it does in order to serve the local community while welcoming the legitimacy of Marshallese idioms and the ways in which they construct the world (and, it is hoped, the institution). The emphasis of the committee has been to operate in Marshallese, so that the institution *thinks* in Marshallese, rather than in translation (and consequently in a way that wrongs the vernacular in favor of English).

There are also a number of uncertainties, as well as direct threats to the institution *as an institution*, that run parallel to this initiative. Indeed, if the college is to truly construct its reality in Marshallese language, knowledges, and figurations, the college may, in a sense, be compelled to commit institutional suicide, as the implications for how a "Marshallese"

institution operates imperil its access to accreditation, and therefore Pell grants (which make up more than 50% of the college's operating budget); notions of colonization; and in fact the whole apparatus of disciplinary power and "universal" knowledge. But this process of thinking in Marshallese is necessary if for no other reason than what Spivak (1993) means when she says "The status of a language in the world is what one might consider when teasing out the politics of translation" (p. 191); in the case of the College of the Marshall Islands, we are left to ask what the status of Marshallese is if it exists merely as an epistemological hurdle, not only in the world, but in the Marshall Islands itself.

An ethical course of action (and I am using that phrase here intentionally, despite its problems of linkage outlined above) is in fact to find ways to destabilize the institution by questioning the epistemology of its structure and practices, and engage the legitimacy of alternative epistemologies, and indeed alternate ways of being, by opening up conditions of possibility. The irony here is that the college does not know the value of Marshallese studies (broadly conceived, and therefore with a small "s"), since it has never actually allowed it to operate or function within its walls. If we want to truly build and sail canoes, and affirm Marshallese studies, knowledges, and epistemologies, we need to confirm the contingency of the institution.

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